Marquette University
e-Publications@Marquette

English Faculty Research and Publications

English, Department of

1-1-2016

Review of *The Hundred Years War in Literature, 1337-1600* by Joanna Bellis

Elizaveta Strakhov
Marquette University, yelizaveta.strakhov@marquette.edu

16.11.15 , Bellis, The Hundred Years War in Literature, 1337-1600

Reviewed by:

Elizaveta Strakov
Marquette University
yelizaveta.strakhov@marquette.edu

Joanna Bellis' excellent study untangles the complicated ideological maneuvering behind late medieval and early modern responses to the Hundred Years War. In this way, it joins recent work on language and war, such as Ardis Butterfield's *The Familiar Enemy: Chaucer, Language and Nation in the Hundred Years War* (Oxford, 2009), Catherine Niall's *Reading and War in Fifteenth-Century England from Lydgate to Mallory* (Cambridge, 2012), and *Emotions and War: Medieval to Romantic Literature*, ed. Stephanie Downes, Andrew Lynch, and Katrina O'Loughlin (Palgrave MacMillan, 2015). As Bellis successfully demonstrates, the Hundred Years War exacerbated a paradox deep at the heart of English identity: as a result of the Norman invasion, England felt itself French, but its Frenchness was born out of conquest and conflict. This problematic Frenchness, moreover, went on to condition the English kings' claim to being the true heirs to the French throne and excused their own eventual conquest of French territory. And yet, precisely because England's Frenchness was so fraught, it also allowed the English to paint France as their enemy and begin to assert a sense of nascent nationalism. By looking at a range of English literature both contemporary with and reflecting on the Hundred Years War--chronicles, pamphlets, poetry, and plays--Bellis explores England's vexed understanding of its cultural and political relationship to France.

In the process, Bellis offers several major contributions to the study of Anglo-French literary and cultural relations, English periodization, and nationalism

more generally. In the first place, she shows that much of Hundred Years War-related English literature centers on linguistic play--specifically, on discussions of Anglo-Saxon versus French loanwords in middle and early modern English--as a synechdoche for the Hundred Years War itself. The hybrid nature of English as a part-Germanic and part-Romance language became mimetic of England's conflict with France for the writers Bellis treats. Secondly, Bellis deftly handles the divisive question of the French language's endurance in England by revealing that most late medieval and early modern discussions of French's extinction or survival are so deeply entrenched in ideological posturing that they can hardly be read as evidence of historical fact. Thirdly, Bellis has her book span the over-emphasized medieval-early modern divide. She is thus able to connect the early modern Inkhorn Controversy, as well as Shakespeare's history plays, with arguments over language already taking place during the Hundred Years War itself. In this way, she contributes to the much-needed revision of the traditional scholarly view that the early modern period in England radically broke with the medieval. Finally, Bellis intervenes in long-standing debates over nascent nationalism to argue that the Hundred Years War ruptures the model of "grassroots" nationalism based on swells of populist support. Her study reveals instead that nationalism can also be consciously manufactured by the literary élite before trickling down to lower social strata. Offsetting the ambitious breadth of the argument with meticulous close readings of a vast, divergent array of sources, Bellis produces a thoroughly illuminating study of pre-modern English identity.

Bellis' first chapter demonstrates the extent to which the Frenchness of the English language became a source of anxiety during the Hundred Years War. Neatly defining identity as "an imaginative image projected upon a larger community by a smaller one, an ideological fantasy of unity built around a simplified fiction" (13), Bellis argues, on the basis of chronicles and political pamphlets, that the presentation of the Norman Conquest as the "Norman yoke," under which English was ruthlessly stamped out by French, was a simplified fiction that spurred the coalescence of English nationalism during the Hundred Years War. Anxiety over the presence of French words in English was conditioned by the worsening Anglo-French wars and therefore retrospectively couched in bellicose rhetoric as a linguistic Norman invasion. Bellis takes this claim--that the Norman conquest was, first and foremost, linguistic--as key context for contemporary assertions as to the death of French and the rise of English in England. What previous scholars have read as evidence of historical fact, she suggests instead to be ideological postures motivated by anxiety over English fortunes in the Hundred Years War. At the same time, she cautions us against simply flipping the model to view English and French as comfortably co-

existing in late medieval England. English *was* being rhetorically elevated to the ranks of a national language, and French's cultural superiority *was* viewed with increasing hostility, Bellis argues, "...but it was a very different kind of nationalism from that once posited by 'triumphalis' narratives: one predicated not on triumph, but fear; not on unity, but fragmentation; not on pugnacious confidence, but inferiority and anxiety" (49). Thus, she suggests, the narrative of the dominance of English paradoxically emerged out of fears over the language's profound dependence on French.

Bellis' second chapter continues to explore contemporary reflections on the Frenchness of English. Bellis begins by convincingly demonstrating that polemicists such as Robert Mannyng and Thomas Usk expressed suspicion of "strange Inglis," or overly ornate, Frenchified English (68). She then close-reads contemporary chronicle accounts of the Hundred Years War, in which, she argues, chroniclers intentionally emphasize French-derived terms in pejorative discussions of French military actions. In this way, she claims, the chroniclers self-reflexively enact the Anglo-French conflict through linguistic play upon the page. While fascinating, this particular argument feels somewhat forced. It presupposes an extraordinary degree of awareness of all French loanwords in Middle English, which contradicts Bellis' earlier discussion in the previous chapter of the indelible interpenetration of French into Middle English in this period (34-42). And while Bellis does furnish multiple examples of French-derived words used in negative contexts to describe the French, the absence of counter-examples demonstrating positive usage of French-derived words in other contexts and of Anglo-Saxon-derived words to describe the English weakens her claim. However, this chapter nicely contributes to arguments, extended by Gabrielle M. Spiegel and others, that medieval chronicles are deeply self-conscious and performative texts. Bellis concludes with an intriguing analysis of William Caxton's 1482 prologue to the *Polichronicon*, in which Caxton systematically switches Anglo-Saxon-derived words in his source for aureate, French-derived words because, he affirms, "rude and olde Englyssh" is no longer intelligible (98). Bellis suggests that the end of the war abated anxieties over "strange Inglis," allowing Caxton to re-steep his text in the very French terms that earlier authors, composing during the war, treated with suspicion.

In her third chapter, Bellis turns her attention onto poetry written about and during the Hundred Years War, extending her previous arguments. She contends here that "...Hundred Years War poetry amplified and concentrated the chroniclers' interest in the performativity of language in the enterprise of writing war" (101). In the first part of the chapter, Bellis analyzes Laurence Minot, anonymous Anglo-Latin flyting poetry that stages word battles between English

and French speakers, and fifteenth-century wartime ballads and carols. Her readings reveal sophisticated linguistic play with social registers and with Anglo-Saxon versus French linguistic borrowings as well as formal experiments with alliteration and rhyme that simultaneously describe the Hundred Years War and enact it through language. Bellis then turns to a poet who does not treat the conflict much in his own writing, but whose language became central to the construction of English nationalism: Geoffrey Chaucer. For Bellis, the paradoxical elevation of Chaucer as an English poet *despite* the profound Frenchness of his English language embodies the push-me-pull-you attitude of England towards France during the end of and after the Hundred Years War. The very illogicality of this move--to claim as English a poet who writes in an aureate, Frenchified idiolect--exemplifies for Bellis England's vexed relationship to its cultural friend and political foe. Chaucer himself, Bellis shows, contributes to these complex retrospective understandings of his language's contribution to English literature through his own "passive-aggressive" (134) negotiations with his humble, yet worthy English in the *Complaint of Venus* and the *Treatise on the Astrolabe*, a familiar point but one well taken in the context of the chapter's larger argument. Bellis goes on to analyze John Lydgate's pro-Lancastrian public poetry composed for Henry VI, where she finds Lydgate also playing with aureate, French-derived language to illustrate the newfound union between England and France post-Treaty of Troyes. If poets writing during periods of English aggression against France use the Frenchness of English to stage political antagonism through language, then Lydgate uses the Frenchness of English to perform the opposite maneuver: his language mixes Anglo-Saxon-derived and French-derived words in a harmony mimetic of peacetime.

Bellis concludes her third chapter by widening her focus to consider the ethics of mimetically representing war through literary language. She argues that John Page's much-understudied *Siege of Rouen*, which she has elsewhere edited and to which she brings welcome attention, struggles with portraying a particularly gruesome incident in Henry V's war campaigns in which Rouen's poorer citizens were ejected from the city and left to die of starvation and exposure. Page claims that he is writing his poem in "raffe [alliterative doggerel]" rather than "ryme" (152), a curious statement because, in fact, Page's poem rhymes and does not alliterate. Bellis takes this as a repudiation of the very linguistic play in which the other wartime poets systematically and propagandistically indulge. The war witnessed by Page is so horrific that attempts at mimesis turn into ethical dilemmas. Page asserts the need for a plain style, sans aureate embellishment, in order to mirror his eyewitness experience more accurately, but that assertion becomes, of course, its own form of linguistic play and ideological posturing. In citing a poet who asks larger questions about the division

between *historia* and *fabula* and the ethics of war poetry, Bellis adds a rich dimension to her preceding discussion of propagandistic, public poetry.

Bellis' fourth chapter turns its attention to the early modern period to situate the Inkhorn Controversy in the much longer history of English anxieties over Frenchness, stemming from the Norman Conquest and buoyed by the Hundred Years War. Bellis excellently demonstrates the extent to which pamphlets celebrating Henry VIII's invasion of France in 1513 revived the rhetoric of Hundred Years War pamphlets in representing political conflict as linguistic conflict. Similarly, early modern writers returned to and sharpened the topos of the "Norman linguistic invasion." They argued for an originary Anglo-Saxon English corrupted and contaminated by later Frenchness in works that asserted English nationalism, thus linking, as their medieval predecessors before them, national identity with linguistic identity. From here, Bellis returns once more to Chaucer and restrospective constructions of his English language that continued to exemplify England's paradoxical relationship with France. Early modern praise of Chaucer's English, Bellis shows, was the diametric opposite of late medieval praise of the same, but was born of that same longer legacy of the Hundred Years War. Chaucer was now praised for the plainness of his English, with the fact that he had imported into it numerous French lexical terms oddly and conveniently elided. Thus, the suspicion of Frenchness in English, inherited from the Hundred Years War, yet the construction of Chaucer as national English poet, inherited from after the Hundred Years War, grew into a veritable tangle of ideological postures that Bellis carefully separates. Bellis goes on, for the remainder of the chapter, to trace metaphors of war and, specifically, invasion in early modern discussions of the English language and its French lexical influences. These metaphors strongly echo the medieval authors she treats in preceding chapters. She further cites early modern chroniclers' emphases on their plain style that eschew "straunge englishe wordes" (195). Bellis thus traces a powerful link between late medieval and early modern conceptions of England's relationship to the French language in a manner that is both profoundly convincing and enlightening.

In her final chapter, Bellis tackles Shakespeare's history plays and their engagement with language and the Hundred Years War. In transferring its focus onto early modern drama, this chapter neatly ties up the different threads of Bellis' over-arching analysis: retrospective constructions of the Hundred Years War, the Frenchness of English, the mimetic use of language to represent war, and language's ultimate failure adequately to do so. Arguing that Henry IV of Navarre's conversion to Catholicism revivified festering anti-French sentiments, Bellis convincingly finds in Shakespeare's *Edward III* and *Henry VI, Parts I, II and*

III the same tropes of war as language and language as war, with particular suspicion of French foreignness, traced elsewhere in her study. She then dwells on *Henry V* and the famous dual-language exchange between Henry and Katherine, in which the governing joke, Bellis shows, is that, for all their linguistic sparring mimetic of the larger Anglo-French conflict they exemplify, the two *do* actually understand each other. As Bellis nicely concludes, "...this scene forces together France's paradoxical functions as 'one flesh' with England, and its ancient enemy. Henry and Katherine's discovery is nothing more than a knowledge lived for centuries, which underpins both their enmity and their courtship: that their languages are mutually embedded; that (disturbingly) they understand one another perfectly" (240). Bellis concludes with an intriguing discussion of *Richard II*. She argues that the play stages the undoing of Richard II--an undoing the play directly attributes to Richard's having been born in France and to his avoidance of engagement in the Hundred Years War--as also an undoing of language itself as Richard bemoans that he no longer knows how or what to call himself. This dissolution of language under the pressures of war is, for Bellis, the culmination of over two centuries of medieval and early modern rumination on the ways in which language attempts to stage and mirror political conflict.

Bellis' study offers valuable insight into a long-standing puzzle besetting scholars of Middle English: that England was deeply, strangely, obsessively also French. Bellis not only carefully peels back the layers of overlapping ideologies here, but she also elegantly works with all the paradoxes of England's relationship with France rather than simply attempting to cut through them or elide them. By extending her arguments into the early modern period, Bellis also allows readers to see that the origins of English nationalism both importantly predate British Empire and continue to nourish it through the sixteenth century. *The Hundred Years War in Literature, 1337-1600* is a boon to medievalists working on Chaucer, Anglo-French literary relations, historiography, and the Hundred Years War, to early modernists working on early modern antiquarianism, historiography, and Shakespeare, and to scholars of nationalism more generally.